

Wycombe Wanderers 3, Barking 0

WYCOMBE Wanderers, two goals up and cruising after 18 minutes, gained another vital victory in the Rothmans Isthmian League on Saturday against Barking. For while the Blues were recording their sixth £40 bonus, their chief rivals were faltering (writes **Stuart Earp**).

But despite the 3-0 margin of this victory, it was not the most convincing of Wycombe wins this season. There were too many mistakes for that.

Even so, Wanderers now know that they can take the championship with three wins from their remaining matches and with their defence in such commanding form at present, they must be in with a great chance of the title.

Although Saturday's game might have seemed a formality to some, Barking came to Loakes Park with an impressive record of 12 games without defeat and even when two goals down, they looked a dangerous side. In midfield, former Wanderer Tony Brothers worked like a beaver to give his side the edge and it was not until the third goal came in the 73rd minute that Wycombe could really afford to relax.

A blustery wind made judgement difficult by Wycombe, fielding Thursday's side that overcame Slough, wasted no time in opening their account. In the seventh minute Ian Pearson crossed to the far post for Howard Kettleborough to power home a header. Goalkeeper Nick Markwick did well to get a touch.

Dylan Evans and Mick Holifield went close before Pearson brought his season's tally to a handsome 40 goals in the 18th minute. He started and finished the move by finding Kettleborough whose cross was headed down to Evans. His shot hit the far upright and bounced right into Pearson's path. It must have been Ian's simplest goal of the season.

WAVERED

Had Wanderers then turned the screw, Barking might have buckled. But instead Wycombe's concentration began to waver and midfield mistakes gave the visitors the chance to get back into the game. Up front, the Blues never regained their earlier momentum and Evans could rarely put a foot right until after the interval.

A fine save from John Maskell prevented Chris Ballard reducing the deficit in the 35th minute and with Brothers making himself first to the ball in midfield, Barking looked dangerous. Up front, the tall Peter Burton caused Keith Mead and Alan Phillips a few problems with his aerial power but he was given little support and Laurie Abrahams, who joins Charlton at the end of the season for a £5,000 fee, seldom showed his full talents.

There was only one flash of brilliance when he ran on to Gerry Anderson's through ball but saw his shot parried away by Maskell.

Barking must have realised that they still had chances in this game for they began the second half well. Burton should have scored when he headed over the crossbar from close range and it was not until 15 minutes had elapsed that the Blues forced

any reply. It came when Kettleborough ran clean through the defence but placed his shot inches past the upright.

IMPROVEMENT

A marked improvement in Evans' play gave Wycombe more punch up front and he was unlucky not to increase the lead after 66 minutes when he cracked a 20 yard drive just wide.

Two corners almost brought further goals for the Blues. Holifield's flag-kick was clipped back into the middle by Evans and Mead headed powerfully for goal only to see Markwick flip the ball away for another corner. This time Phillips' header flew towards the corner of the net but was cleared off the line.

But Alan's luck changed in the 73rd minute. Bob Davies floated in a precise free kick to the six yard line and Phillips went up for the ball with Burton and nodded home a deflected goal.

The third goal cancelled out any hopes of a Barking revival and enabled Wycombe to cruise for the final 15 minutes. Momentary slackness in the defence

caused a few anxious moments but the Essex men were unable to capitalise and it was Wanderers who went closest to scoring again in the 81st minute.

Kettleborough tried a lob from outside the box and the ball struck the underside of the crossbar and bounced on the line. Pearson dived in but was hindered by the goalkeeper and his header went wide.

At the time it seemed a fourth goal would have done Wycombe's goal difference a boost but when the Enfield and Dagenham results were revealed, the championship race took on a completely different look.

WYCOMBE: J. Maskell; P. Birdseye, K. Mead, A. Phillips, R. Davies, G. Mackenzie, J. Priestley, M. Holifield, I. Pearson, H. Kettleborough, D. Evans. Sub S. Hill (not used).

BARKING: N. Markwick; G. Twiddell, K. Barrett, J. Ford (Sub G. Haley 73 mins), M. Cleaver, G. Anderson, A. Brothers, C. Ballard, B. Key, P. Burton, L. Abrahams.

Referee: C. Simpson (Yateley).

Half-time: 2-0.

Goalscorers: Kettleborough (7),

Pearson (18), Phillips (73).

Attendance: 1,250.



Scorer of Wycombe's first goal, Howard Kettleborough, turns in a cross at Loakes Park on Saturday.